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**Ruptures in Harmonizing Discourses:  
Exemplifications in some Works of Black and White  
Writers in a Democratic South Africa**

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**Ruptures in Harmonizing Discourses: Exemplifications in some Works of Black and White Writers in a Democratic South Africa**

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**Abstract**

Some writers have attempted a comparison of South African post-apartheid literature written by blacks with that produced by their white compatriots, as in Anne Putter's (2012) enlightening analyses of Ivan Vladislavic's *The Restless Supermarket* (2012) and Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* (2006). A writer such as Milazzo (2015, 2017) has discussed some discourses tying together apartheid-era and post-apartheid South African English literature, among them continued considerations of institutional racism. The point of departure of my present study is that postmodernist transnational features, seen by some critics as characterising post-apartheid South African literature written in English, have been highlighted at the cost of the deviances obtained in the literature. In this paper, I compare conceptions of the post-apartheid South African city represented by Ivan Vladislavic's satirised white characters on the one hand, and on the other hand those of the black characters in the works of Niq Mhlongo, Kgebetli Moele and Phaswane Mpe. Collectively and across the two categories, I scrutinize the four writers' novels *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), *Dog Eat Dog* (2004), *Room 207* (2006), *The Book of the Dead* (2009), *Double Negative* (2011), *The Restless Supermarket* (2012), *Untitled* (2013) and *Way Back Home* (2013). I interpret the later texts by black writers in relation to their earlier long narratives, in order to take account of the evolution of this category of my selected texts to the period in which their later works grapple with social issues of the same era as those of the white writer Vladislavic. I hope to reveal how dynamically the discourses in the fiction of the two categories of writers constitute counterpoints that, decoded with adequate rigour, represent more nuanced depictions of the post-apartheid society of their common milieu.

**Keywords:** Hillbrow, institutional racism, post-apartheid, postmodern, South African English literature, transnational

## Introduction

In this paper, I compare how the white post-apartheid writer Ivan Vladislavic on the one hand, and on the other hand black writers Niq Mhlongo, Kgebetli Moele and Phaswane Mpe differently handle concepts such as persisting institutional racism, hegemonic silencing of black anti-racist critiques, and white talk insidiously seeking to perpetuate white privilege in an ostensibly equal democratic South Africa. I do this through a consideration chiefly of Vladislavic's *Double Negative* (2011) and the *The Restless Supermarket* (2012) from his oeuvre. I illustrate Vladislavic's discourses on South African social change, as he reflects beyond the first decade of South African democracy, by juxtaposing them with perspectives of black writers Niq Mhlongo, Kgebetli Moele and Phaswane Mpe in their novels of the same period *Way Back Home* (2013) and, *Untitled* (2013). Apart from briefly discussing the earlier novels of Mhlongo and Moele in order to provide background in this comparison, I include Mpe's earlier narrative *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) for the reason that Vladislavic's works of the second decade of democracy do include a much earlier setting of the nascent years of such political change. This aspect of Vladislavic's fiction necessitates a comparison with Mpe's work that interrogates the dynamics of early social change in a common Hillbrow setting of the early, uncertain years of democratic change in South Africa. I contextualise my analysis of Vladislavic's fiction within discourses of his other long narratives. It is in the same breath that I discuss Mhlongo's and Moele's novels in relation to the issues they tackle in their other earlier works. Mpe's early novel, set in the first decade of democracy, is the only long narrative he produced before he died, hence the imbalance not to include a work of his in my discussion of second decade narratives.

I demonstrate how, in their chequered ways, these two main categories of South African novels differentiated by their portrayal of either black or white characters reacting to a common social transition, collectively depict lives set in Hillbrow and other cities. I do this in order to determine ways in which the novels fit in Barnard's (2012: 655) description of "transition-era novels written in English". This implies examining how the narratives "engage the transformation of South African cities by describing the simultaneity of history and emergent post-apartheid possibilities" in the first decade of the democratic South Africa, in Titlestad's terms (Titlestad 2012: 680). I argue that the two categories of novels interrogate literary imaginaries, presumed modernities, and visions of socio-political freedom in a post-apartheid South Africa from two racially divided perspectives. In other words, ways in which the two sets of writers perform what Putter (2012: 151) has explained as a "blurring [of] parts of the old apartheid city with the new renovations and reconstruction taking place" diverge in ways I substantiate by analysing the texts.

I hinge my argument on the varying discourses of the post-apartheid novels, conveyed through dissimilar characterisations of black and white characters. I demonstrate how discourses of the white and black writers use differing literary manipulations in relation to the post-apartheid episteme described by writers as Milazzo (2017: 142), in her remark that,

"While much South African criticism has moved away from a concern with institutional racism and white supremacy, reading ... recent novels by black writers through a critical race lens shows that post-apartheid literature continues to provide imaginative windows into racial inequality, racial ideology, and the struggle for freedom".

Institutionalised racism, according to Milazzo (2015: 11), should not be obfuscated through simplifications into "individualized conceptualization" of "racial categories". I look at the two sets of post-apartheid novels in order to test whether they affirm what Milazzo (2015: 129) laments as "racism viewed merely as individual prejudice" evident in much of post-apartheid criticism that excludes the true nature of racism having institutional and structural dimensions. In Milazzo's (2015: 129) view, this kind of a post-apartheid "shift away from a concern with institutional racism and white supremacy", which commentators on South African literature employed appropriately in critiquing apartheid-era literary discourses, leads to inadequate analyses of South African literature, the subject matter of which is socio-economic crossroads faced by black and white people in the post-apartheid period.

This is why I saw the need to re-interpret the post-apartheid novels of Mhlongo, Moele, Mpe, and Vladislavic. My first aim in doing this is to redress what Milazzo (2013: 37) has debunked as "the ways in which the "post-apartheid canon" has been (mis)represented" in order to posit an idealised postmodernism and even a globalising transnationalism. Using the fiction of the four post-apartheid novelists, I demonstrate how their works continue with apartheid-era censures of white privilege and thus disprove, rather than affirm, a harmonizing of actual ruptures in an assumed transnational post-apartheid literature.

The rationale for post-apartheid scholarly hegemony in South Africa invoking the notion of transnationalism in order to silence what I see as continuing literary engagements with structural racism and white privilege is clear. The significant South African literary critic Leon De Kock, using such a rationale, argues that while

"remaining important or even necessary for a sense of history and drive in making distinct some sort of national imaginary, the category "South African" as a marker of a literary field ... has irrevocably entered into the fluid waters of "trans", the transitive cusp of crossing and recrossing, of absorbing the fictional self into (now easier, more fluid) spaces of related elsewhere and of absorbing the otherness of such elsewhere into the fictional self" (2011: 28).

Recognising what De Kock and the other critics describe as "a transnational turn" of South African literature starting from the 1990s in post-apartheid South Africa, thus includes their ideological acknowledgement that nationally, apartheid has collapsed while transnationally the world had begun to flatten out laterally, with national boundaries "suddenly [becoming] superfluous in the wake of economic and technological flows uniting people within global networks" (De

Kock 2011: 22, 28). In South African post-apartheid transnational "literary-cultural pursuits the desire [is] to step beyond the enclosure of the "national" ... "the struggle" terrain, in order to adapt to a post-apartheid modernism in which the "new horizon" is distinctly transnational" (De Kock 2011: 22).

Unfortunately for post-apartheid South African literature produced by writers such as those whose works I discuss in this paper, continuing in interesting ways to lead in pursuing the liberation struggle as in the era of apartheid, "the increased salience of cultural hybridity and hybridization" forbidding any mention of institutional racism in the new democracy politics, coupled with the rise of "world literature" (De Kock 2011: 23), is an index as Milazzo has argued of "how colonial structures of power are reproduced in our time on a global scale" (Milazzo 2017: 134). Lund (2006: xv) is lamenting such a hegemonic silencing, in his description of the invocation of a transnational episteme such as one manifest in mainstream South African post-apartheid literary analysis in the form of "transnational discourses of racial hybridity that white elites often invoke to delegitimize claims to reparations made by people of color". As may be argued with cross-racial post-apartheid South African fiction of the post-apartheid period, black and white fiction writers' nuanced handling of issues carried forward from the apartheid era should not be mistaken for a simplistic disregard of what the critic Titlestad (2012: 677) describes as the inevitability of South African cities like Johannesburg and Pretoria "engag[ing] African and global modernity".

Mhlongo's, Moele's, Mpe's and Vladislavic's post-apartheid novels have been produced in a social context where, according to Milazzo (2013: 36), "literary imaginaries, academic scholarship, and public racial discourse in post-apartheid South Africa" have been shaped into a denialism purporting that "economic power is primarily a consequence of individual merit and personal responsibility; and that racial categories should therefore preferably *not* be invoked". I argue that it is in their distinguishable responses to such a context that the two categories of novels assume their distinctive textures, with Vladislavic employing sarcasm effectively against the reactionary white section of the democratic South African populace.

I thus approach the six novels in a manner responding to the invitation articulated by Milazzo (2017: 129), "to rethink the shift away from a concern with institutional racism and white supremacy that is evident in much post-apartheid criticism". In this way, I attempt to determine the extent to which the six post-apartheid South African novels "[speak] to striking continuities between colonial past and postcolonial present" (Milazzo 2017: 139) within an inefficacious scholarship "that silences structural racism and reinscribes color-blindness" (Milazzo 2013: 36).

### **The National versus the Transnational in Mpe and Vladislavic**

Portrayals of Hillbrow in Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) and in Vladislavic's *The Restless Supermarket* (2012) reveal conflicting attitudes of blacks and whites, as the two groups anxiously negotiate the shifting states of

post-apartheid Johannesburg of which Hillbrow is a part. A comparison of the two novels published eleven years apart is justifiable, considering that both are set in the early years of democracy, with Vladislavic even starting with the Codesa environment prior to the first democratic elections. Mpe's narrator reminds the dead Refentše of the scary celebration of the South African national team's win against Ivory Coast during the 1995 soccer match, in which revellers spinning cars recklessly and "making U-turns and circles all over the road" drive over a young girl, killing her, with some callous members of the audience showing no shock at the murder (pp. 1-2).

Vladislavic's protagonist Aubrey Tearle's revulsion as he walks through Hillbrow streets is specifically against "flat dwellers of colour" who on New Year's Eve routinely celebrate by throwing "unwanted furniture from their windows into the streets below" and turn the festive mood into a drunken street fight (p. 30). For Mpe, an antidote against such Hillbrowesque celebration is the absence of excitement in the face of transnational intermingling, in the metaphor of the *world* cup loss against France at the time of the narrator's communication (p. 1) (my own emphasis).

Significantly, for Vladislavic's narrator survival against such carnivalesque jubilation on New Year's eve, which symbolises the dawn of a democratically non-racial society coming along with South African freedom from colonisation, is in the form of one being wise and lying low "until it [is] all over" (p. 30). In a role representing the exaggerated paranoia among Hillbrow whites, a character named Floyd externalises a large-looming fear of the dawn of equal cohabitation with blacks in a democratising Hillbrow, in his description of the bomb-like violent New Year's Eve excitement in Hillbrow streets where "firecrackers [go] off" at carousers' feet and "a beer bottle [explodes] on the tar" thrust by a black person "from a window in the High Point Centre" of Hillbrow (p. 253). When Aubrey expresses shock at the almost apocalyptic festivities, Floyd recalls the previous New Year's Eve incident in which a fridge landed on a minibus when "someone chucked [it] from the top of [Hillbrow's] Ponte", and thus cautions Aubrey to expect worse bewilderment the next day (p. 252). In the face of the rumpus on Hillbrow streets, worsened psychically by fear of what is in store the next day, Aubrey responds by indicating to Floyd that he (Aubrey) "should have stayed at home" (p. 253). By such a polysemic reference to "home", at a profound level the protagonist can be said symbolically to reveal an endemically white nostalgia for lost security of the old apartheid era, likened by the character Floyd to a homely atmosphere. The character prefers such an escape to a cityscape existing nostalgically only in his own mind, rather than venture out to experience the disquieting socio-political change South Africa is facing during the transition. For the portrayed white Hillbrow residents, therefore, an escape from the present is a wishful return to the apartheid past, or self-dislocation to what for them is the transnational metropole white colonisers have originally come from (seen in Aubrey's earlier reference to England). Paradoxically, the allure of an ideal white nationalism proves more appealing to the white characters than some acculturating transnationalism, hence Neville's admission in Vladislavic's *Double Negative* (2011) that during his sojourn in England he "felt interrupted" (p. 145).

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), Mpe laments the deaths of at least eight people and severe injuries of at least thirteen when the Hillbrow New Year's Eve celebrations take "the form of torrents of bottles gushing out of the brooding clouds" that are flat balconies (p. 5). The metaphor of "brooding clouds" hints at Mpe's atmospheric awareness of what Titlestad (2012: 680) has described as the post-apartheid city's state of being too immoderate and unresolved to be mapped. Significantly, Mpe does not ascribe such an unsettling inscrutability overtly to one racial group. This is why the warning "Hey you! You do not go around greeting every fool in Hillbrow. He looks harmless. But not all people who greet you in Hillbrow are innocent wellwishers" (p. 12), does not identify the linguistic-cultural identity of the indigent except to mention that "they are beggars" (p. 12). Interestingly, Vladislavic paints the racialised sympathy that the character Wessels shows to the white indigents in *The Restless Supermarket* (2012) in high relief through a conflicting reaction by the main character Aubrey, who is in Wessels's company (p. 150). Faced with the post-apartheid city's blurring of formerly racialised economic fortunes, the main character Aubrey is tempted to abandon Wessels for the reason that he sees Wessels's identification with a white hobo as "degrad[ing]" (p. 150). In contrast, Wessels is drawn towards the white vagrant by some empathy making him presume that "kaffertjies" have cut the white pauper's tongue, figuratively purporting that the socially fallen white man's fortunes have been taken from him by the parvenu blacks in the new South Africa. In Mpe's example above, it is rather the national concern with crime bothering the black characters trying to make a home for themselves in Hillbrow. In this way, the black characters in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* "desire to harmonize space in the city ... emphasizing a need to move forward", to use Putter's (2012: 151) words, in ways differing from Vladislavic's white characters who rather react to change by seeking to escape it in ways I demonstrate.

Aubrey's evident distancing from racially defined humanism, as exemplified in the character Wessels's encounter with the white vagrant, is actually his abhorrence of the white hobos' disorderliness. This is the function of the narrator's mission to "hold up examples of order and disorder, and thus contribute to the great task of mainlining order where it already existed and restoring it where it had been disrupted" (p. 93). For Aubrey and the section of white Hillbrow population Vladislavic depicts, impending black appropriation of the Hillbrow social fabric deserves a repulse for order to prevail, in much the same way the white characters seeming to abandon their traditional supremacist airs need mending back to orderly whiteness. For the white characters to acclimatise readily with the changing city, is a sign of disorderliness as far as Aubrey and the other white characters sharing his thinking are concerned. By the same token, as he takes stock of progress made on the Book, Aubrey lumps such altering whites together as requiring fixing into orderliness (p. 226). The Book project should be understood as representation of a reactionary resistance of change from racial segregation now sweeping the streets of Hillbrow. That is why, as an epitome of conservatism, Aubrey describes fellow whites not performing as required in the Book project as "the human detritus ... found in the margins of the city, the erroneous ones, the slips of the hand, the tramps, the fools, the



congenitally stupid, the insufferably ugly" who it was "more humane [to do] away with ... at one painless stroke" (p. 226). Such characterisation is in keeping with Vladislavic's satire on exaggerated white fears of impending majority rule in about-to-be-democratic South Africa, and of the racially changing texture of society.

Allegorically, Aubrey's mission is the cleansing of the good old apartheid South Africa of impending assertion of black cultures in formerly exclusively white cities. This he perceives in a lop-sided manner as restoration of order within the South African population. This is why the character saunters through Hillbrow streets with the hope of venturing into some architectural item consistent with the old, unchanged Johannesburg (p. 57). The trauma experienced by the narrator through the persistent disappearance of exclusively white nationalist culture (exemplified by a moulting Café Europa) intensifies instead. This happens when he experiences "a tribal thing" at the socially intrusive Hack's Meat Superette in Kapteijn Street (p. 57). For Aubrey Tearle, the "rows of skewered [poultry] carcasses, cranked round by a machine behind fat-splattered glass, applaud[ing] with flippery wings" (p. 57) poke at him a metonymically "disorderly" take-over by black tribal cultures, in a formerly "orderly" Hillbrow imbued with the symbolism of intact Europeanness. Such a hankering after intact whiteness is incongruous with white equanimity during apartheid rule. That is why for the white nationalists wishing for a continued apartheid existence in a democratic South Africa, in the characterisation of Aubrey, Vladislavic symbolises the "Right of Admission Reserved" outlook, in terms of which the "Open Door Policy always gives ... a chill" (p. 253).

After Vladislavic's main character in *The Restless Supermarket* (2012) has narrowly escaped being knocked down by a bakery driver going about business in typical Hillbrow dog-eat-dog fashion, the I-narrator steadying his nerves with liquor at the Chelsea Hotel reveals the black identity of the ladies of the night making him uncomfortable with their taunts (p. 310). Vladislavic cynically characterises the I-narrator in this scene to associate lowly conduct in the city with a specific race. This is why the irony the novelist intends to reveal is palpable when the narrator hints that the most assertive among the prostitutes speaks "in isiSotho or whatever", with the rest of the "streetwalkers" talking among themselves "in the same lingo" (p. 31). The alienated narrator Aubrey metonymically represents the overwhelmed section of the white population in a new South African city that is characterised by mutating social relations in which formerly whites-only public amenities are now shared across racial lines.

Vladislavic's other character in the novel *Double Negative* (2011) and short story by the title of "Dead Letters" (2015), the professional photographer Neville Lister, bolsters a similar discourse. For the protagonist of the two narratives trying to make sense of a "bewildering" new South Africa, the present feels like the past when he shoots discrete groups of blacks and whites for advertisements (p. 90). The protagonist confesses that for him "the old versions of things [trail] behind the new ones in brackets, fading identities and spent meanings" (p. 90). In order to satisfy the new government's policy of racial reconciliation, the black and white groups Neville is photographing "mix" while at the same time

remaining heterogeneous, revealed by their failure to hold hands (pp. 90-91). Not only is the present a hostile locale for Neville, the future merging with the present in a flux is "a foreign country too" for the young photographer Neville. This is revealed by means of the stereotypical character of a young black woman cashier at Pick n Pay, "whose northern suburbs drawl" makes her accent difficult for Neville to colour-code (p. 91). This happens in the midst of hegemonic white-capital media in the young democratic South Africa ridiculing "black voices," which the white section of society is beginning to hear for the first time on radio and television (p. 91).

Cumulatively, Vladislavic's sneering portrayal of white recoil against the changing post-apartheid city affirms what Putter (2012: 150) sees as "depictions of Johannesburg as undermining or subverting the myth of oneness or unified nationhood". For the white characters depicted in Vladislavic's narratives, such an undermining of a multicultural nationhood stems from a fear to lose white privilege still lingering in the young democracy. That is why, for instance, it is unsettling for the white characters to hear a black person speak English in an accent passing him or her for a white person. Vladislavic's characters whose blackness is manifested by means of the different language varieties they speak more or less affirm Kruger's (2012: 669-670) observation that "urban subjectivities are existential and concrete ... . Urban life is about immersion in a world of multiplicity, where one can – theoretically at least – become anybody, make oneself anew".

However, the new South Africa language varieties used by Mpe's characters chafe against Kruger's (2012: 669) converse remark about cities generating "an improvisational mode of being and belonging, quite different from that proposed by nationalism." For me, the reason Kruger (2012: 669) gives, that "national belonging is inevitably an ideological and abstract matter" differing from the actual state in the new South Africa of being "simultaneously global and intensely local", provides the reason why the writings of this era by blacks and whites differ in their characterisation of black and white characters. For this reasons, I illustrate how Vladislavic's novels are similar to Mpe's narrative in delineating what Kruger (2012: 670) explains to be "a new cosmopolitanism, however fragile, in which South Africa becomes part of Africa, just as Africa – in the shape of those thousands of migrants and refugees seeking new lives ... become part of Africa". I argue that Vladislavic and Mpe, nevertheless, differ in their notions of race as a contributing factor in postmodern social deformity. My observation, as my evidence from the compared narratives demonstrates above, is that the characters representing Vladislavic's postmodern concern do so from a formerly identifiable white nationalist comfort zone whose unnerving transformation fundamentally pivots on the entry of people other than whites.

It is a white nationalistic imaginary Vladislavic sardonically posits as the spring from which formerly privileged whites envision a democratic South Africa, as embodied in the protagonists of his Hillbrow fiction under consideration. On the contrary, Phaswane Mpe's discourses in *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2001) "deal with urban wanderers and confront issues of displacement, migration and xenophobia ... [hinting] at a new cosmopolitanism, however fragile" (Kruger

2012: 670). Unlike in Vladislavic's characterisation, Mpe utilises characterisation in a manner foregrounding African cultural consciousness as a survival kit with which to negotiate social adaptations one would require in the enigmatically unfolding democratic South Africa constituting the setting of his trope of the Hillbrow novel. This is why when the I-narrator rubs in the dire consequences of Refentše's suicide on his circle of friends he invokes "gods and ancestors" as watchers of mortal conduct along with God (p. 67), in the terms conjuring up an African cultural cosmology. One more example indexing African cultural spirituality is the flashback to how Refentše's former lover by the name of Refilwe re-assembles her life beyond the former's suicide. In this instance, Mpe's narrator describes the death of Refilwe's mother as "When at last the gods mercifully released her mother from the sharp claws of her illness" (p. 97). Black nationalist consciousness cutting across African cultures informs Mpe's characters as they negotiate the meaning of a post-apartheid Hillbrow. Mpe and Vladislavic thus meld differing black and white nationalisms through the department of their discursively disparate characters.

### **Continued Assertion of Africanist Nationalism in Mhlongo's and Moele's Post-Apartheid Fiction**

In what may be described as his call for a return to indigenous African cultural morality, in his novel *Untitled* (2013) Moele effectively refracts the theme of women abuse, which Mhlongo traces back to exile days in *Way Back Home* (2013).

In *Untitled* (2013), the teenage protagonist Mokgethi drops out of a private school located in a ritzy suburb due to the general post-apartheid economic strife of blacks, and finds herself in a public school that does not "have a school bus, established sports facilities or modern sports equipment, a library or a laboratory" (p. 183). In this novel in which Moele assesses post-apartheid life beyond its nascent euphoria, the national impact of a still-racialised economy forms the backdrop against which he censures the excesses and overall depravity of the democratic government. As such, this post-apartheid black writer continues non-racially to confront the frailties of the government during democracy, in the black nationalist-liberationist mould started by earlier apartheid-era black writers who did the same with white rule. In his furtherance of a typically black nationalist discourse highlighting the racialised gains of institutional white privilege the perpetuation of which he censures, Moele's spotlight falls on the democratic government's exacerbation of the situation through digression from the national project of reversing such effects of institutional racism.

In *Untitled* (2013), genuine nation builders such as Mokgethi's lady teacher Miss Kgopa do exist, yet they are overwhelmed within the black majority democracy by immoral powerful figures (p. 87). Mokgethi's new school principal, Shatale, continues for a long time to rape one of Mokgethi's friends, Lebo, while also sexually abusing more young girls in his school (pp. 74, 88). School dropouts who have become upwardly mobile by crooked means see less economically

powerful men and women as objects for their sadism and libido. Moele employs the voice of the narrator Mokgethi to challenge the black communities themselves, to take the lead in moral regeneration: "Cry, little girls of my beloved country, the Bonolos, the Pheladis, the Lebos and the Dineos that have to live, are living, in communities full of men who prey on us every day" (p. 208). Vladislavic lampoons the image of a Hillbrow seen through the character Aubrey's lens, as well as conceived through the sensibilities of the other white characters thinking like him in *The Restless Supermarket* (2012). The writer manipulates this section of the white Hillbrow population to foreground the nuisance aspect of black characters in a racially defined manner, at the cost of conceding to the latter's causal victimhood of lingering white economic privilege, amidst brutalisation by corrupt black characters who are powerful in a democracy -- which latter facet of the new democracy is highlighted especially through Moele's characterisation in *Untitled* (2013). Moele's two counterbalancing sets of black characters divided by class, as described above, reveal that he projects black characters in a way that does not emphasise their race any more than it does their human frailty not highlighted as having to do with their race.

Vladislavic's protagonist Neville in *Double Negative* (2011) confesses to his mother that he is "out of sorts" and thinks "he might be better off in England" because of "a succession of small irritations with way things work, or don't work" (pp. 187, 189) in the democratic South Africa. Rather than imagine a transnational escape the way the characterisation of Neville suggests (symbolized by England), Moele's discourse in *Untitled* (2013) posits African cultural nationalist values as the efficacious weapon against corruption. It is clear that both writers are appalled by corruption, as is the case when the narrator in *Double Negative* (2011) is ripped off by a black Home Affairs Department official and his patron in a "photocopy racket" (pp. 187-188). In this apparent act of corruption, the government photocopier is said not to be functioning so that a black entrepreneur who runs a photocopying business from a shack on Home Affairs' ground may make money through his own photocopier (p. 188). Significantly, the nature of irritation experienced by Moele's and Vladislavic's narrators differs, as well as the remedies the two writers put in relation to the dichotomy nationalism/transnationalism.

It is fundamentally black rule that frustrates Vladislavic's main character, although corruption is the ostensible reason. By the time the narrator reaches the Home Affairs premises, he is already flummoxed after looking for the apartheid street name, Hans Strijdom, instead of the new name, Malibongwe Drive, which he irritably associates with "an election" (p. 187). Although there is a possibility of corrupt patronage in the "photocopy racket", the satirical writer does not state outright that this is the case. One more possibility is that the government machine is indeed broken, forcing officials to redirect clients to an informal business otherwise meant positively to combat unemployment that locks the underprivileged in a cycle of poverty. One may thus say that it is more a racially defined malaise among the selected segment of white characters living in Hillbrow in Vladislavic's fiction that drives them to reject the non-racial city coming with a new non-racial South Africa. However, in his depiction

of another segment of white characters in *The Restless Supermarket* (2012), who do not do well in the Book project, Vladislavic's sardonic characterisation of those who perform well in the project to preserve the old order comes through effectively, in a manner that does not totalise the writer's white Hillbrow characters as all belonging to the constituency of character such as Aubrey.

With the discursive evolution I sketch above as far as Moele's *Untitled* (2013) is concerned, it is no surprise that in *Way Back Home* (2013) Mhlongo intensifies his focus on the neocolonial flaws of postapartheid leaders. Mhlongo paints such acquisitive leaders' ironic worsening of black disadvantage in bold strokes while at the same time immersing incidents within the context of disrupted white privilege. This is seen when, in a move that Aubrey and the other like-minded white characters in *The Restless Supermarket* (2012) would have seen as an intrusion, the black former exile Kimathi spoils the white comfort of Willem and Jacoba by buying Mr Redelinghuys's next door mansion when the latter moves house (p. 130). Clinging to an evanescent class structure inherited from apartheid segregated economic opportunities, the white couple initially mistake Kimathi for their white neighbour's servant, and only discover days later that the former exile Kimathi is the new owner of the mansion when they see him "drive out in his BMW, wearing a very expensive suit" (p. 131).

The reader tends to empathise with the white neighbours for their failure to adjust to change, as when their inability to afford the luxury life of a former exile now turned a corrupt entrepreneur comes to the fore. The white couple, unable to afford "a bottle of Glenfiddich single malt whisky" steal from the whisky container of their new black neighbour Kimathi (p. 131). Such pinching is stylistically tempered though, through its juxtaposition with the execrable act of Kimathi boasting to a fellow struggle exile turned government contract swindler Sechaba, to have bought the whisky of which there were "only three in the country" for twenty eight thousand rands. An evocation of some sympathetic mitigation for Kimathi's white neighbours for stealing the obscenely expensive whisky is achieved in the face of such scandalous boasting by the former exile. The crescendo, within the context of events I outline above, of the high flying black neighbour of Willem and Jacoba passing out near the swimming pool while drinking the liquor (p. 131), evokes apathy for the ravenous Kimathi.

Mhlongo's discourse with such characterisation satirises supremacist bias in ways that are unlike Vladislavic's in *The Folly* (2014). In the latter case, eccentric conduct of the white squatter Nieuwenhuizen charms a fellow white Malgas, entailing the former's futile construction of a conservatively conceived model that is out of place with the changing socio-political landscape of a democratic South Africa. In a similar relation of neighbours, Mhlongo's character Kimathi repels his white neighbours due to his blackness. This is because the white privilege expectations of the neighbours Willem and Jacoba fail to reconcile blackness with Kimathi's economic prosperity in a city neighbourhood expected in the apartheid past to be welcoming only to whites. The fact that Vladislavic's neighbour relation in *The Folly* (2014) is white-on-white reveals that racial identification may play a more important role in harmonious neighbourliness.

Vladislavic's acute censure of a simplistic friendship based on race comes through when the conservative project of the present-denying model vanishes due to harsh weather and an impending intrusion by masses of black toilers who protest on the streets against the lack of delivery on the promises made by the democratic government. Significantly, Vladislavic's discourse remains one that white characters must not be homogenised vis-à-vis the follies tied to denialism within the context of a new, non-racial society. Malgas's wife's overt hatred for the squatter, who is a fellow white, attests to Vladislavic's call for judging people for their human frailty rather than their race. In this way, Vladislavic, like Mhlongo, advocates for a rupture from discourses that seek to harmonise post-apartheid living by playing down the need to confront extant gains of institutional racism that seek to deny formerly disadvantaged blacks entry into decent existence, in a racially determined way. Vladislavic satirises dispositions like those of Malgas in *The Folly* (2014), where someone is accepted for being of a certain race, and with a whimsical wish to preserve racially constructed privilege. Both writers acknowledge the persistent existence of structural racism, and censure continued exclusion based on race and/or newly acquired or inherited class.

Mhlongo's discursive evocation of sympathy for the unchanging white characters in *Way Back Home* (2013) serves to render his characterisation as non-racially motivated as Moele's in *Untitled* (2013). Vladislavic cynically peoples his fiction with racially motivated white characters even as he censures such characters' reactionary attitude towards the changing living space, whether in the city (as in *The Restless Supermarket*) or in the country (as in *The Folly*). Such harmony between Vladislavic's discourse through the use of characterisation on the one hand and on the other hand Mhlongo's and Moele's does not only manifest in the latter's works produced beyond the first decade of post-apartheid South Africa. I consider below manifestations of such rupture with a glossing-over discourse in Mhlongo's and Moele's earlier literary outputs.

### **Earlier Stylistic Forging of Mhlongo's and Moele's Black Nationalistic Discourses that Defy the Imaginary of a Transnational Panacea**

Starting right with his earlier novel, *Room 207* (2006), as Milazzo (2013: 49) has observed, Moele "avoids falling back onto a deterministic victimization of blacks and represents a post-apartheid South Africa in which racial pride, knowledge, and personal choice can contribute to escaping destitution". Milazzo (2013: 34) interprets the discourse of Moele's *Room 207* as "both challeng[ing] and reinforce[ing] colour-blindness discourse and, in mystifying institutional racism, appear[ing] emblematic of the ideological ambiguity and dearth of antiracist militancy that inform much twenty-first century black fiction written in English". In this way, Milazzo incisively identifies the ideological concepts of colour-blindness and its concomitant effacing of institutional racism, to be the concerns of post-apartheid South African fiction by black writers, known during apartheid for their unambiguous antiracist militancy congruous then

with the general spirit of fighting for freedom. However, unlike her and the other scholars interpreting a novel like *Room 207* (2006) as inane on the negation of colour-blindness, I see a consistent combating of apartheid ideologies and a continuity with anti-apartheid narratives of the past in this and the other novels I focus on. I argue that the narrator of *Room 207*'s "seem[ing] terribly split, torn" point of view (Murray 2011: 89), is a mere veneer belying the counter colour-blind narrative of the novel.

One of the six friends living in Hillbrow's Room 207, Modishi, has a rural background, and has inherited a farm and his parents' house in the Soweto township of Mapetla (pp. 48-51). The narrator, Noko, is from a background where his father has told him not to expect any financial support from him, although he is still in his economically vulnerable years of early adulthood (pp. 74-75). The characters Zulu-boy and Matome come from rural KwaZulu Natal and Bolobedu in Limpopo, respectively (pp.13, 210). These characters and their other roommates have been staying in Hillbrow for eleven years, yet they continue to regard the urban flat as their "locker room" away from their real homes in rural South Africa (p. 13). For me, the adult characters and idealised rural landscape forming the psyche of all the inhabitants of the Hillbrow flat symbolise a conscious continuity with African cultures usually perceived to be more intense in rural residences than in urban spaces like Hillbrow. For the *Room 207* inhabitants, adaptation to a newly racially mixed Hillbrow under democratic liberation does not mean turning their backs on the rural richness of their cultural roots. Such valuing of the characters' African lifestyles conflicts with the self-denying mimicry of black characters perceived through protagonists' eyes in Vladislavic's satirical novel *The Restless Supermarket* (2012).

A case in point is the perceived conduct of the black man Merope and the other black characters joining him at Hillbrow's High Point Centre (p. 133). The racially jaundiced protagonist Aubrey Tearle psychologically projects the "half a dozen black men ... wearing business suits and toting briefcases" as unequal to their white counterparts (p. 133). This is borne from the protagonist's visualisation of the newly arrived black tenants' disposition as awkwardly straddling the irreconcilable statures of dignified bosses and menial "chauffeurs or watchmen" or, for the women, those of lording madams and crawling "domestic servants" (p. 133).

In a sense, the "thousand condoms" forming part of the room's scanty yet ambitious furniture that Moele hoists as part of the setting, right at the opening of the novel *Room 207* (2006), signify the evidently invincible hugeness of the characters' insecurity in a culturally alien Hillbrow culture (p. 13). By such a setting, Moele constructs a heady metropolitan magnetism characterising his kind of Hillbrow, which impersonates pleasures that can easily destroy anyone who is without inner strength and caution. This is the effect of the image of a "thousand condoms", symbolising responsible sex while simultaneously invoking hazards associated with HIV/AIDS crawling delicately close to any act of coitus. Because the primacy of inner strength is the novel's motif, Moele's black characters are able to develop a founded gravity in a Hillbrow that they are able

to appropriate, unlike the black characters living in the Hillbrow of the protagonist of Vladislavic's *The Restless Supermarket* (2012).

It is their delineated African cultural consciousness that provides Moele's characters with such much needed agency. That is why, for example, Moele describes the character D'nice's mind as "different", for the reason that he has been to "a rural public school" before coming to study at Wits University (p. 36). In this description, Moele highlights the redeeming presence of D'nice's rural cultural psyche that he has brought along to the new world of Hillbrow. There should be no doubt that Moele's discourse asserts ethnic identity as a weapon against the structural racism keeping blacks in South Africa poor beyond apartheid rule. Extant structural racism serves to maintain the socio-economic privilege of whites, who the setting of *Room 207* (2006) exposes as continuing to enjoy institutional elevation above the underprivileged black characters. The consistency with which Moele paints Zulu-boy in heroic terms should dispelled any such doubts about the six friends turning apartheid-induced tribalism into an empowering self-valuing. Towards the end of the novel, Hillbrow's hegemonic smothering (symbolised by HIV/AIDS) has destroyed Zulu-boy's body in a manner resembling psychic oppression through a post-apartheid colour-blindness Milazzo (2015) debunks as plotted by those in leadership roles. Rather than elicit unheroic pity in the reader, Moele envelops the dying Zulu-boy left with only one day to live in an aura of sustained tribal pride associated with the Zulu people although he "[has] Aids" (p. 210).

Undefeated tribal pride enables Zulu-boy heroically to call Noko and invite him to his own funeral, so that he should "be there when they are closing the Zulu out" (p. 210). Consistent with Moele's assertion of tribal identity as endearing and accommodative to Africans of other ethnic groups, Zuluboy addresses Matome over the phone in the former's typically humorous affection as "Satan of a Pedi boy", while rounding up his friends from his deathbed to bid them goodbye. Remarkably, the psychically triumphant Zuluboy despite physical routing by HIV/AIDS concludes his goodbye message in an unbroken spirit of profoundly valorising sexual intercourse with women suffering from AIDS, with the loaded words, "hope you are enjoying the sex" (p. 210). HIV/AIDS clearly serves as an effective metaphor for a sick democratic South Africa relating with marginalised black citizens in a way victimising them, like a people having unsafe sex with an infected partner. Zuluboy's message seems to be that, rather than evade the sick democratic South Africa like someone avoiding sex with an HIV-infected person, fellow Africans must confront it as they will emerge victorious. Spiritual survival is elevated above threats of physical ruin to the black victims of Hillbrow life. In a thematic crescendo, Zulu-boy boasts that at his funeral "Mfana womPedi" (meaning my good Pedi friend) will meet with the former's Zulu-Africanist resilience, the avatar of which is his (Zulu-boy's) mother, aptly described as "a big Zulu woman with a big Zulu heart" (p. 211). For Zuluboy cultural survival embodied in his mother matters more than the sacrificial death of an individual who has positively grappled with the new social order.

Concluding the conversation with the affectionate words "Mfana womPedi", after opening it with the deceptively caustic "Satan of a Pedi boy", serves to nullify



any possible inference that Zulu-boy's reference to the ethnic identity of his Hillbrow friends is hateful. Differently from Vladislavic's characterisation in *The Restless Supermarket* (2012), Moele does not utilize character delineation to depict a discredited ethnic identity that would insinuate a failure of black people to adapt to the multiculturalism of metropolitan Hillbrow, or awkwardness with technological advancement that is ahead of the texture of quotidian life in South Africa's rural areas. The "young black man in a shiny suit" who makes a scene by "hurl[ing] himself down" an escalator going in the opposite direction (pp. 144-145) is one example of characterisation in *The Restless Supermarket* (2012), serving to portray the negativity borne of apartheid-like racist supremacy symbolised in the lampooned portion of the white characters of the novel.

The moral of such a depiction of black characters' cross-colour seepage into Hillbrow social life in the early years of democracy, from the point of view of Vladislavic's category of virtually cartooned white characters, is the opposite of the effect of Moele's characterisation in *Room 207* (2006). In a continued gesture signalling a symbolised "conquering" of HIV/AIDS and the overreaching mannerisms gained from institutional racism which it represents, Moele's character Zulu-boy makes a final phone call to D'nice in a manner hinting at the culturally infinite expansion of his multi-ethnic solidarity. Unfazed, he declares to D'nice, "Mfana woMtswana, I'm going to sleep today and you will not see the Zulu tomorrow" (p. 211). He moves from fondly mentioning Pedi ethnicity this time to doing the same with the Tswana cultural group constituting one of the many building blocks of a confederal African nationalism.

The culturally affirming relationship among Zulu-boy and his friends converges with the notion of an underlying African consciousness binding together the different African tribes (Mphahlele 2002: 252-255). Symbolically in their behaviour, the *Room 207* friends exemplifying the post-apartheid South African populace striving to defeat a white-privilege society reveal Moele's message that the black characters derive their self-defining spirit from their common Africanness underlying all African consciousnesses and lifestyles (Mphahlele 2002: 136). The black citizens of metropolitan Hillbrow, which Moele's characters represent, manage to merge with the urban environment creatively on their own terms without suffering a culturally effacing hybridity, mimicking the economically privileged white characters forming the frame of their actions.

Such a theme of conquering self-definition is enhanced and broadened in Moele's later novel *The Book of the Dead* (2009). The metaphor of HIV/AIDS as a representation of extant institutional racism, as well as its concomitant drawbacks requiring black people to counteract with their survival kit of adaptive African cultural indigeneity introduced in *Room 207* (2006), explodes to all-consuming proportions in *The Book of the Dead* (2009). Moele's discourse in *The Book of the Dead* (2009) to rally black people nationalistically to fight self-destructive Hillbrowan social tendencies defines purposefully what could otherwise degenerate into a gratuitous magnification of HIV/AIDS virulence painted earlier on a small scale in *Room 207* (2006).

In *The Book of the Dead* (2009), Moele manipulates HIV/AIDS deaths to occur rampantly in order to hint at the climactic drawbacks of persisting structural racism, with a doubled impact due to combination with what Murray has accurately described as commensurately rank excesses of the democratic rulers, ruining "many black people's lives under the elitist, self-serving variant of democracy that has come to dominate post-apartheid South Africa" (Murray 2011: 86). Once more, the antidote against a possible colour-blindness and the other challenges coming with the new South Africa crystallises as African consciousness and lifestyle.

As young migrant workers from the protagonist Khutso's rural village of Masakeng in *The Book of the Dead* (2009) occasionally return from the big cities, they go "home to visit their ancestors; to give thanks, to ask for a better tomorrow" (p. 10). The African spirituality premise shows up again when Khutso has passed his matric exams and his mother "dance[s] a ritual dance, thanking all of her ancestors" (p. 27). The subverting of ethnic partitioning introduced by Moele in *Room 207* (2006) resurfaces, to obfuscate whatever ethnic difference might threaten much needed black unity in the fight against worsened neo-liberal freedom conditions. Khutso's girlfriend Pretty is of an extraneous tribal identity, yet she puts Khutso's mother at ease with her readiness to partake of goat meat during festivities (p. 52). Significantly, she motivates from an overarching African spiritual point of view that goat meat "is the gods' preferred meat" (p. 52).

It should be Moele's progressive intensity from *Room 207* (2006) to *The Book of the Dead* (2009) in censuring post-apartheid silencing of white privilege, that has led Murray (2011: 89) to repeat her observation of a conflicted narrator in *Room 207* (2006), this time echoing the sentiment in the words, "Readers of *The Book of the Dead* have had problems with the unevenness of the work". In my view, observations of such a "splitness" of the narrator of Moele's debut fiction, and of thematic "unevenness" in his second novel, unfortunately stop short of pointing out a pervading cultural consciousness that I identify as fuelling characters in his two novels – thus positing a coherent and even style.

Mhlongo's earlier novel similarly yields seeds of what grows in his later works. When the protagonist of Mhlongo's *Dog Eat Dog* (2004), Dingz, accuses the Wits Dean of Students spuriously of racist supremacy in order to extort an undeserved aegrotat exam using the words "Meaning that blacks always lie about their situation", he rebuffs the university official's sober reference to rules by retorting, "Those rules, I think, must also take cognizance of the cultural diversity in this country" (pp. 210, 211). After threatening to take his quarrel with the Dean to the SRC for justice, Dingz gets away with murder and is "granted a deferred examination" unjustly (p. 211).

Earlier on, when this stratagem is hatched, Dunga provides a false justification for Dingz's truant lie as the fact that in early post-apartheid South Africa "the whites themselves already live in the web of a big lie" (p. 168). Such a justification does contain some truth in as far as persistent white privilege exists in post-apartheid "nonracial" South Africa, where blacks, according to Milazzo (2013) continue to be structurally disadvantaged by institutional racism.

However, the author's technique results in the reader's sympathy going to the white characters. Mhlongo highlights the pathetic position of the white section of post-apartheid South Africa, when the two white friends Dingz eavesdrops upon in the toilet amplify it metonymically: "Can you say anything nowadays? They will just dance that toyi-toyi dance of theirs and call you a racist ... Us white people no longer have a hope in this country... . They've got the power now and there's nothing we can do" (p. 169). The writer castigates black debauchery where the reality of white privilege is abused and acquitting himself of what would otherwise be a racially partisan discourse. Such a discourse marks Mhlongo's characterisation as different from Vladislavic's, in the latter's portrayal of racialised responses of the kind of white characters he delineates to a mutating Hillbrow, in a novel such as *The Restless Supermarket* (2012).

Consonantly with his discourse in *Dog Eat Dog* (2004), in *After Tears* (2007), Mhlongo manipulates his protagonist, University of Cape Town dropout Bafana Kuzwayo, to yield to ephemeral pleasures distracting him from a self-defining project to qualify for the benefits of a modern post-apartheid South Africa. Through the characterisation of Bafana, Mhlongo (2007) accentuates lack of personal effort and individual aberration as the causes of Bafana's failure to heave himself out of apartheid era structural deprivation. The incidents of *After Tears* (2007) constitute a pastiche of community protests against a token colour-blind deracialisation by means of which a new middle class secures continued exclusionary gains from apartheid era institutional racism, sewn together with Bafana's antiheroic establishment of a fake law practice (pp. 154-167). The profundity of such a juxtaposition of apexes of individual failure and a national fiasco, of Bafana and black post-apartheid leadership respectively, is an index of the novel's function as more than what Titlestad (2012: 682) perceives as a "picaresque ... [mode] in which black urbanity is represented". Of course such an analysis by Titlestad is consistent with his rather reductive view of a novel like *After Tears* (2007), as individually picaresque and not adequately as metonymic. In a rupture from individual thuggery at the centre of picaresque narratives, Bafana's roguish attempts at facing the new post-apartheid city's challenges represent such a state of affairs epically in the black post-apartheid nation.

Despite their discursive variations, Mhlongo's and Moele's novels reveal the complex texture of post-apartheid South African society in ways that foreground the need for a more introspective and profound political and civil society leadership. Milazzo's (2013: 39) observation that "These novels continue to direct our attention towards the multifarious legacies of apartheid and invite us to witness the enduring differential value of black and non-black lives", therefore, needs to be extended to include the thematic call of the works for black people's introspection so that they may plumb and reclaim the African consciousness with which they will conquer their new existence. The invaluable contributions of Mhlongo's and Moele's works towards such a national project differ from how Vladislavic's characterisation pokes fun at his white characters' failure to embrace racial equality demanded by the altered city of a democratic South Africa – in *The Restless Supermarket* (2012) and *The Folly* (2014), for example.

## Conclusion

I have looked at some novels of Mhlongo, Moele, Mpe and Vladislavic in order to determine the extent to which the six post-apartheid South African novels "[speak] to striking continuities between colonial past and postcolonial present" (Milazzo 2017: 139) within an ineffective scholarship "that silences structural racism and reinscribes colour-blindness" (Milazzo 2013: 36).

This led me to question writers who interpret Mhlongo's, Moele's and Mpe's indices of an African cultural consciousness in their characterisation as conflicted, due to such analysts' assumption that the novelistic discourses of the three post-apartheid black writers propound a nationalism-dissolving transnationalism. My findings pointed to an alternative hoisting of African nationalism as the proposed way forward in democratic South Africa without suggesting cultural fossilisation.

I found this to be the way these black writers interrogate critical views represented in the example of Milazzo's (2016: 13) observation that, "Much philosophical scholarship on whiteness ... reproduces obsolete understandings of racism and consequently proposes misguided "solutions" that further naturalise and sustain white supremacy". That is why, among others, I have demonstrated how in *Room 207* (2006) Moele's discourse problematises a statement like Milazzo's (2013: 46), about "emphasis on ethnic differences" not providing "a useful antiracist strategy". Tribal diversity among Moele's characters does not hamper a black cultural nationalism. Rather, such an attribute among Moele's characters consolidates an African nationalism. However, I illustrated that the nationalism the black writers of prose fiction show as a tool enabling their characters' domestication of Hillbrow differs from that hinted at by Vladislavic through the actions of his white characters.

Mhlongo's discursive evocation of sympathy for the unchanging white characters in *Way Back Home* (2013) serves to render his characterisation as non-racially motivated as Moele's in *Untitled* (2013). Vladislavic cynically peoples his fiction with racially motivated white characters even as he censures such characters' attitudes towards the changing city. Such a contrast between Vladislavic's characters on the one hand and on the other hand Mhlongo's and Moele's does not only manifest in the latter's works produced beyond the first decade of post-apartheid South Africa. I demonstrate in this research that Mhlongo's and Moele's earlier literary outputs also realise what Milazzo (2016: 129) has proposed as a rethinking of "the shift away from a concern with institutional racism and white supremacy that is evident in much post-apartheid criticism".

I went further to test evidence of transnationalist tendencies in the characters of some of Vladislavic's post-apartheid novels. I demonstrate that although some characters fancy a transnational escape from the new South Africa symbolised by the altering city of Johannesburg a section of which is the suburb of Hillbrow, it is a nostalgic return to an exclusively white nationalism Vladislavic satirises in his characters' disposition.

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